

Record numbers of Irish women visit Britain for abortion

Doug Payne *Dublin*

The abortion issue in the Republic of Ireland—never far from the public consciousness—is bubbling up again. New figures show that a record number of women from the republic had abortions in Britain in the first three months of this year—1520 compared with 1458 last year, an increase of 4%. In total, 5892 women who had abortions in Britain last year gave their address as being in the republic, compared with the 1997 figure of 5336.

In addition, about 2000 women from Northern Ireland also travel to Britain each year because the United Kingdom's 1967 Abortion Act does not apply in the province. Only about 90 legal abortions are carried out there each year.

The latest increase in the republic reinforces a consistent upward trend of the past 25 years: in that time, the number of reported abortions in Irish women has quadrupled, while the total number being carried out in UK women is falling.

Most women travelling from the republic for abortions are working women in their 20s. Catherine Conlon, the Dublin sociologist who was one of the authors of *Women and Crisis Pregnancy*, a report published by the Department of Health last year, said that various factors contributed to their decision to seek

abortion, including the demands of work and the persisting stigma of single motherhood.

Demand for the emergency contraceptive pill is rocketing in the republic, mainly among the young. Allison Begas, chief executive of the Well Woman Centre, which operates three services in Dublin, noted that demand for emergency contraception has risen by between 50% and 70%.

There had been, she suggested, a change in social attitudes: "The rise in the demand for [the emergency contraceptive pill] shows teenagers are becoming complacent about sex. A higher percentage of girls are having unprotected sex and not only risk pregnancy but also face a growing threat from sexually transmitted diseases."

The Irish government says that its green paper on abortion, in preparation since 1995, is due out this month. The Independent MPs who have been propping up the government have made it clear that they expect another referendum within six months of the conclusion of any green paper debate.

Meanwhile, Northern Ireland's main pregnancy counselling service, the Ulster Pregnancy Advisory Association, is closing its doors after staff harassment and attempts to burn its offices down. □



The Foundation for the Prevention of Sexually Transmitted Diseases, in the Netherlands, last week launched its 11th annual safer sex campaign with television commercials and posters aimed at promoting condom use. The words on the poster above say: "Genital warts are available everywhere. So indeed are condoms." Research by Utrecht University shows that among the target group of 15-35 year olds with multiple partners, 40% did not carry a condom and one in four of these had had unprotected sex in the past six months. The Netherlands, with a population of nearly 16 million, has about 100 000 new cases a year of sexually transmitted diseases.

Dolly's other DNA came from donor egg

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

The DNA in the nuclei in cells of Dolly, the cloned sheep, came from the udder cell of an adult sheep. But where did the DNA in her mitochondria come from?

A report by scientists from Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York and the Roslin Institute in Scotland reveals that all Dolly's mitochondrial DNA came from the enucleated oocyte with

which the udder cell was merged (*Nature Genetics* 1999;23:90-3).

The discovery has implications for preventing the inheritance of rare but fatal human mitochondrial diseases. Although there are only 37 genes in human mitochondrial DNA, these genes control almost all energy metabolism in every human cell. "Without them, we'd be out of business," said Dr Eric Schon, professor of genetics and development in neurology at Columbia.

Dr Schon explained how Dolly was created: "The team at Roslin took the whole udder cell, placed it next to the enucleated egg cell, and ran an electric pulse through. The pulse is thought to punch holes in the

membrane, and the nucleus slides into the oocyte."

Almost certainly, some of the udder cell's mitochondrial DNA also got into the oocyte; Dr Schon expected to see perhaps 2-5% of mitochondrial DNA from the udder cell in the mitochondrial DNA of Dolly.

"We were surprised to find no contribution from the somatic [udder] cell," he told the *BMJ*.

The explanation for Dolly's lack of udder cell mitochondrial DNA is what Dr Schon thinks happens in humans. Sperm have mitochondria in the neck part of the sperm's tail, but the mitochondria are destroyed after merging with the egg.

Somehow, egg cells get rid of mitochondria carried by sperm.

Only maternal mitochondrial DNA is inherited. "Mitochondrial DNA defects are truly devastating. The infants turn into vegetables. They may live only until 15 or 20. There are no animal models, and there's no treatment," Dr Schon said.

A woman with a defect in mitochondrial DNA is likely to see a geneticist only when she has had an affected child. Prenatal diagnosis, available at a few centres, is often inconclusive.

In future, to prevent transmission of a mitochondrial DNA defect, a woman with a defect might choose to have the nucleus from one of her somatic cells merged with an enucleated oocyte from a donor woman with healthy mitochondrial DNA. □